

Reach out to homeless families

“Research has shown that homelessness puts children at increased risk of health problems, developmental delays, academic underachievement and mental health problems. Homelessness also has a disproportionate impact on the youngest children, who account for *more than half of all children in federally funded homeless shelters* (emphasis added) (Bires, Garcia, and Zhu 2015).



Families experiencing homelessness are caught in a double bind. At the same time their children are feeling the devastating impact of homelessness, their families face obstacles in improving their situation, including accessing early care and education for their children. That’s where you come in.

Defining homelessness

Communities in the United States began to see homelessness as a significant problem in the mid-1980s (Bassuk, DeCanadia, Beach, and Berman 2014). In 1987 Congress passed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defined the homeless as “individuals who lack a *fixed, regular, and adequate* nighttime residence” (Warner 2016).

Examples of homeless children:

- children sharing a home due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- children living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations;
- children living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- children abandoned in hospitals;
- children whose primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation, such as park benches;

- children living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations;
- migratory children living in any of the above situations.

Often a homeless family may consist of a single mom, unemployed, with no high school diploma, and having two children younger than 6 years old. She moves often, may have experienced domestic violence, and struggles to protect and support her children.

HOMELESS CHILDREN FACE TERRIBLE RISKS.

The impact on children in such situations can be disastrous. “Children experiencing homelessness are among the most invisible and neglected individuals in our nation,” according to a report by the National Center on Family Homelessness (Bassuk et al. 2014). “Despite their every-growing number, homeless children have no voice and no constituency. Without a bed to call their own, they have lost safety, privacy, and the comforts of home, as well as friends, pets, possessions, reassuring routines, and community. These losses combine to create a life-altering experience that inflicts profound and lasting scars.”

Homeless children face terrible risks: “Children who are homeless are sick four times as often as other children, experience four times the rate of developmental delays, and have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems. Sadly most homeless children do not receive the services they

need to address their high rates of medical problems, developmental difficulties, and mental health needs. In addition, over half of all children who experienced homelessness at some point by age 5 moved more than three times during that period,” and frequent moves hinder school achievement (Bires, et al. 2015).

Early care and education professionals know that such risks can be lowered through high-quality educational and child care experiences in preschool.

Legislation provides access

The McKinney-Vento Act helped improve access to education for homeless children, and as a result states and federal agencies began to focus on early care and education programs. These included Head Start, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014.

Responsibility for carrying out these laws rests with various individuals and providers:

- Head Start collaboration offices partner with other state entities that provide services to benefit low-income children and their families. To find your Head Start Collaboration Office, see <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/states/collaboration/map/index.html>. The Texas office, for example, is administered by the Children’s Learning Institute, University of Houston.
- Federal law requires every state to have a state coordinator for homeless education, responsible for working with public schools throughout the state. To find your state coordinator, see the National Center for Homeless Education website, <http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/StateProfile.aspx?StateID=51>. The Texas contact, for example, is Jeanne Stamp, University of Texas at Austin, 512-475-6898.
- Federal law requires every public school district to designate a staff person who will identify homeless students, ensure their enrollment and participation in school, and connect them to resources. To find your school district coordinator, contact the state coordinator above.
- Homeless service providers, which receive grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, are available for consultation about local family homelessness. For an extensive list of providers, see www.hudexchange.info/grantees/.

What does this mean for you?

A common barrier for families experiencing homelessness is lack of child care. They often have trouble getting a family member or friend to care for their children while they are looking for a job or getting job training. They may also lack a high school diploma or GED certificate, which makes it doubly hard to find a job in a time when employers need well-trained workers.

Many parents simply don’t know that they qualify for child care or preschool programs. If they have tried to enroll children in a program, they may have felt intimidated by forms requiring a home address and immunizations.

Homeless families are typically transient, making it difficult to reach out to them and keep them engaged. Once contacted, however, they are more likely to try to stay in touch if they trust a staff member in your facility.

As an early care and education program, you may receive referrals from local agencies. A public school in your neighborhood, for example, may refer a family to you about infant care. Or a family homeless shelter in your community may phone about vacancies in your program.

Your state may offer subsidies for providing child care to homeless children. In Texas, for example, you may receive funds through Texas Workforce Solutions to provide three months initial care regardless of eligibility verification (age or citizenship/immigration status) or work/training activity by the parent. You may continue care through nine more months (12 months total) if the child’s eligibility is documented and the parent is in any level of job activity. Plus, the family is exempt from paying a share of the cost (Warner 2016). For a directory of Texas Workforce Solutions Office and Services, see www.twc.state.tx.us/directory-workforce-solutions-offices-services-0.

Identifying homeless families

Simply asking a parent if the family is homeless may not work. A family may be reluctant to self-identify out of shame or embarrassment, or out of fear of losing their children to protective services. A better strategy is to ask the family to describe the living situation and whether it’s permanent.

Schools can provide good models for identification because they have been required to identify homeless

students for many years. The National Center for Homeless Education offers information on best practices and sample forms on its website, <http://center.serve.org/nche/>.

Homeless families may not have identification that would allow them to enter your program or school grounds. Consider holding outreach or engagement events outside of school grounds.

Enrolling homeless children. The law allows the enrollment of homeless children while health and immunization records are being gathered. Schools have used this practice with “extremely limited risks to the health of other children in school” (Bires et al. 2015).

Ideally in asking sensitive questions, staff will take care not to be overly invasive. They need to support families in accessing and navigating other service systems that help meet their needs. Staff can help families learn about the full range of services available, especially if the family is new to child care assistance programs.

Homeless families may find it difficult to entrust their children to you because of previous negative experiences with programs or the trauma that made them homeless. You can allay some of these fears by allowing parents to call in or to visit the classroom as they wish.

Tips for teachers

Recognize that your classroom may be the only place where a homeless child feels safe. Follow a predictable schedule so the child knows what to expect. Provide a buddy who can help the child find the restroom, use materials in learning centers, comply with rules, and feel a sense of belonging.

Be aware that the child may have experienced some kind of abuse or trauma. A child may feel angry, anxious, and afraid and as a result may act out. Offer a quiet place where the child can calm down. Redirect the child to a soothing activity such as the sand/water table or the art center.

Recognize that a child may be tired and hungry. Avoid scolding the child for falling asleep or not paying attention during circle time. Provide healthful meals and snacks promptly.

Emphasize that you have high expectations for the child’s success. Encourage the child to answer questions and give opinions. Show

confidence that the child can complete a puzzle, learn to count, sound out the letters of the alphabet, and learn other skills. Recognize effort over innate intelligence.

Be kind, respectful, and accepting of the child’s parents or guardians. Avoid judging parents or blaming them for their situation. Demonstrate your belief that parents are a child’s first teachers and your willingness to partner with them. Share information about the child’s activities and accomplishments. Listen to their ideas and concerns.

For more information

Bassuk, Ellen, Carmela J. DeCanadia, Corey Anne Beach, and Fred Berman. November 2014. *America’s Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness*. Waltham, Mass.: American Institutes for Research, accessed at www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Americas-Youngest-Outcasts-Child-Homelessness-Nov2014.pdf.

Bires, Carie, Carmen Garcia, and Julia Zhu. October 2015. *Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness: CCDF State Guide*, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, www.theotx.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CCDF-Homelessness-Guide.pdf.

Warner, Phil. Dec. 8, 2016. Overview of Changes to Child Care Services, presentation at annual Texas Workforce Conference, www.twc.state.tx.us/files/partners/2016-conference-changes-to-child-care-program%5B7a1fd18b%5D.pdf. ■

Basics for bosses

Directors of child care programs and preschools, like managers in other businesses, must comply with state and federal laws and regulations. In Texas, many employer-related laws are administered by the Texas Workforce Commission.

Among TWC's resources are posters that employers are required to display. See www.twc.state.tx.us/businesses/posters-workplace to download posters on such things as the Texas Payday Law, (Texas Labor Code, Chapter 61) which requires employers to pay employees in full and on time on regularly scheduled paydays.

waiting period. Employers may decide whether to allow carryover from year to year and whether to pay unused accrued time in the event of layoff or resignation. Employers may require advance notice of when vacation time will be used, and prohibit use of vacation time at certain times (such as busy season). ■

NO LAW REQUIRES EMPLOYERS TO GIVE THEIR WORKERS PAID VACATION DAYS.

Another useful resource is *The A to Z of Personnel Policies*, at www.twc.state.tx.us/news/efte/table_of_contents-az.html. The section on vacation and sick time contains information such as the following on vacation time:

No law requires employers to give their workers paid vacation days. If giving vacation time, however, employers may determine how much to offer; their decisions are usually based on industry standards. Employers are free to determine which employees receive vacation time (full-time employees but not part-time, for example) as long as they do not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, and other protected characteristics.

Employers may determine how vacation is accrued—such as one day a month after an initial

BUILDING A BUSINESS

Expand your professionalism: Write an article

As early childhood educators, we are often reminded to be professional. Typically, early care and education professionals have earned a college degree or designation such as a CDA, and continue to stay up-to-date in the field by taking continuing education courses and participating in seminars.

Educators may demonstrate professionalism by leading workshops and giving presentations at conferences as well as writing articles for professional journals. We encourage you to consider writing an article for *Texas Child Care Quarterly* that reflects your knowledge and experience in early care and education. We also welcome articles that offer hands-on learning activities that teachers can do with children to promote cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

For writer guidelines, see www.childcarequarterly.com/pdf/guidelines.pdf. ■